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The Beginner’s Guide to Culture Jamming

Section I: Introduction and Context

A high school student sitting in homeroom watches the student-geared news production Channel 1, a ploy by conglomerates to introduce advertising disguised as information into schools. The unremitting and hidden advertisements determine how the student will spend his allowance money. Meanwhile, a big city socialite blows extraordinary amounts of her parent’s money in a desperate search for what fashions she is told are “in”; elsewhere, a college graduate at the bottom rung of the corporate ladder struggles to keep afloat in the nine-to-five rat race in order to achieve what he has been told is “The American Dream.” Contrary to superficial observations, the student, the socialite, and the businessman are startlingly alike. The three are subjected to the constant deluge of mass advertisement as they strive to take the lead in the marathon of incoming and outgoing trends; the student, the socialite, and the businessman have been made slaves by their cultures, or rather, by businesses. Advertising corporations who have sunk their teeth into consumer life have been tremendously destructive to the citizens and culture of America.

The current crisis America is facing has reached a dangerous state. Not only is the condition of the American economy at stake, but also is the freedom of its citizens. The student, the socialite, and the businessman are consumers, the heart and soul of American life. Corporations will stop at nothing to acquire the dollars and attention of consumers. Without knowledge of the crisis, every single American is at risk of falling into the clutches of society. However, a glint of hope shines in these dark times. Kalle Lasn, author of Culture Jam: How to Reverse America’s Suicidal Consumer Binge- and Why We Must, indentifies the cultural crisis, offers suggestions and means of overcoming the problem, and illustrates a world in which Americans have broken free of the consumer trance. With this book, Lasn aims to educate his audience and eliminate the threat facing American culture.

Section II: Author’s Background

Kalle Lasn was born in the small European country of Estonia in 1942, but fled to Australia to escape WWII. In 1960, Lasn moved to Japan where he started a wildly successful market research company. However, after noticing the twenty-five cent charge to release a cart at a local supermarket, he realized that he did not want any association with mainstream society. Lasn then sold his business and moved to Vancouver to pursue a career as a documentary filmmaker (“Kalle Lasn”). Lasn was a man on top of the world, and yet he realized he was at the epicenter of a mammoth injustice. Lasn took it upon himself to educate the public so that he may save as many people from the consumerism trap as possible.

In order to reach the masses with his message, Lasn founded *Adbusters* magazine, a publication concerned with “the erosion of our physical and cultural environments by commercial forces” (Lasn XIII). With the popularity of *Adbusters*, Lasn spawned the Culture Jammers, a subculture of individuals whose mission is to eliminate the threat that commercial businesses have placed upon everyday life (Lasn XI-XVII). Kalle Lasn has unearthed a predicament, and synthesized a solution.

With a magazine publication and a subculture of dedicated followers, Lasn has dedicated much of his own resources to solving this problem. Such a passion is essential to remedying the social crisis.

Section III: The Book’s Argument

Kalle Lasn believes the student, the socialite, and the businessman represent every American citizen. All American lives are in danger of being consumed by American culture. In Culture Jam: How to Reverse America’s Suicidal Consumer Binge- and Why We Must, Lasn first identifies the problem, suggests multiple solutions, and depicts a world in which the people, not the businesses, have won the culture war. Partnered with illustrations, charts, and a slew of first hand experiences, Lasn seeks to exterminate the corporate vermin terrorizing American culture.

As people become more dependant on consumerism and goods, acquiring supporters for an anti-consumerist nation is becoming increasingly grueling. Lasn uses hard-hitting facts and professional support to establish appeals to his audience’s logical sense, and thus indoctrinating them of the grave injustice facing the nation. According to Lasn, industries such as fashion have had negative physical effects on consumers, and organizations, although stimulating for the economy, are doing more damage to the environment, than good to the general populace.

Its no surprise that companies such as Calvin Klein and Abercrombie & Fitch scour the planet to find the most attractive people to model their clothing. After all, if pretty people wear these clothes, surely the clothes are cool enough for everyone to wear, right? What advertisers do not realize, however, is that displaying the size 0 model blown up three hundred times her original size on a billboard in the middle of Times Square has horrific effects on the self-esteems of everyday, average-looking people. The Calvin Klein Obsession ads can cause women to “feel insecure about (their) sexuality, and stop behaving authentically” (Lasn 175). Seeing the half naked model in a Calvin Klein Obsession advertisement may cause a young teenager, who looks up to these models, to turn to bulimia in order to emulate her idols. This happens until that little girl withers away to skin, bones, and superficiality.

Unbeknownst to most consumers, the “real cost” of a good is far beyond the sticker price. In fact, the true cost of owning a car, which consists of environmental costs, which are laid upon following generations, and the actual cost of the car, is about $100,000 (Lasn 180). The damaging effects companies have on the environment are forced upon our future generations. Moreover, although research shows the economy has been on a track of steady increase since the 1950s, the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW) has remained constant. ISEW measures the measure of the economy when the negative aspects, such as pollution, health costs, and depletion of nonrenewable resources, are factored into the overall cost (Lasn 89). When juxtaposed with a Gross Domestic Product chart, which measures a nation’s economic performance, the ISEW shows no increase, and thus the economy, due to the mass consumer binge, is severely wounded.

Although the situation seems grave, Lasn assures his readers that, once a stand is taken, Americans can overcome the ties that bind. Taking a stand can be as simple as altering a public advertisement, or, taking after Lasn himself, as intricate and involved as launching an anti-advertisement campaign. One who commits such acts is termed a Culture Jammer (“Culture Jamming”). Culture Jammers, a subculture founded by Kalle Lasn himself, seek to demean the industries that have taken a hold of American life. If one person can muster the courage to launch a local television spot speaking of the evils of the fast food industry, others may follow suit, and thus the message spreads like wildfire.

A world without oppressive corporations running America is a world where citizens are free to choose what to buy. It is a world where the groups of generic teenagers are unafraid to show an ounce of individualism, an action currently regarded as social suicide at the highest levels of the fashion world. In this new utopian society, the true cost of living would be greatly reduced (Lasn 201-210). Although Lasn presents this new society with great detail, this remains a hypothetical civilization, however, with upmost support and participation from the nation, this dream can become a reality. The author supposes that the world’s problems will cease to exist once corporations are knocked off of their pedestals.

Section IV: Opposing Viewpoints

Although Lasn presents his arguments with such confidence that they appear impermeable, critics have found small cracks in his points. For example, producers are simply not entirely at fault; they supply the means for consumers to get their hands on what they desire. Furthermore, the tactics companies use to seek consumers’ dollars are conducive to good business and follow the laws of economics. Lastly, companies, such as Phillip Morris, have undeniably attributed to great economic growth in the United States. The small holes in Lasn’s argument have been chiseled away by critics until they have become large gaps, which have become detrimental to the spreading of his message.

The United States populace consists solely of consumers. The duty of a consumer is to spend money on goods and services to stimulate the economy, which in turn allows for the consumption of more goods, creating a cycle. In order to inform the masses of their products -products demanded by customers- companies have turned to advertising, the only reasonable means for educating the public. To be frank, Americans have no right to demand a product, and yet publically bash the supplier of said good. Americans are biting the hand that feeds, a practice deemed rather hypocritical.

The aforementioned statement that companies must inform the masses of their products is a prime example of business economics. Without people willing to buy the products a business manufactures, the paradigm of the American economy will cease to exist. American corporations are seeking profits, and must secure consumers’ dollars or face bankruptcy. To say a company is wrong to exploit whatever means to stay afloat is, in turn, just as erroneous as the argument of the commenter.

Philip Morris, the conglomerate behind Marlboro cigarettes, Kraft Foods, and other household brands, has taken the preponderance of criticism in the past. However, the company, which supplied the very product responsible for millions of deaths worldwide, is also accountable for enormous economic growth in the United States. Philip Morris returned an estimated $7.6 billion dollars to investors in the year 2008 alone (Kuepper). Many people are benefitting from the economical practices of corporations, and with the increase of support comes a rise in benefits. Instead of seeking to destroy American businesses, citizens should seek to support, because, in the long run, the entire nation profits.

Like most controversial arguments, Lasn’s faces a great deal of criticism. What is unarguable, as of now, is that organizations do have the right to seek profits. However, companies have crossed the ethical line with the unremitting tactics used to secure consumer’s dollars. People are getting hurt, physically, financially, and emotionally. The time has passed for citizens to stand by and watch, and Kalle Lasn is leading the crusade to end this problem once and for all. If people start heeding to even a portion of Lasn’s teachings, Americans can finally break free of the menacing grip of corporate America.

Section V: Conclusion

The student, fed up with the constant bombarding of advertisements, decides to spray paint skulls over Calvin Klein ads, post Grease stickers anywhere the McDonald’s logo graces a street corner, and produces makeshift anti-advertisements to display around town. The socialite, tired of everyone else dictating how she is supposed to look, dress, and act, decides to participate in Buy Nothing Day and begins shopping at local thrift stores. The businessman, realizing the cookie-cutter life laid out for him by his society is not a life in which he wants to live in, quits his job, and pursues a career as a musician. Whether he is successful or not is unimportant, because he is happy. The three have defeated their repressing environments; they are free.

Corporations have an astounding influence in American society and culture-this is an incontrovertible truth. Although in small amounts, such an influence can prove to be a good thing, the weight of this influence is becoming unacceptable. Kalle Lasn has identified this problem and made it his mission in life to educate the populace, and eliminate the situation. Lasn truly believes that a world in which citizens are free of corporate dominance is a world that everyone deserves to live in. Participation, which is critical at this stage in the battle, can be simple: a vandalized advertisement, an anti-advertisement, or simply enlightening a peer. With maximum support, America can revolutionize from a nation of consumers to a nation of Culture Jammers.

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